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Executing Daniel Bright: Race, Loyalty, and Guerrilla Violence in a Coastal Carolina Community, 1861-1865

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Review

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Myers, Barton A. *Executing Daniel Bright: Race, Loyalty, and Guerrilla Violence in a Coastal Carolina Community, 1861-1865*. Louisiana State University Press, \$32.50 ISBN 9780807134757

One Community's Complex Experience with Civil War

Many Civil War historians today are focusing on guerrilla warfare and detailed community studies as a way to illuminate the dynamics of loyalty and dissent, conflict and violence in the Civil War South. They are recognizing the prevalence and importance of guerrilla warfare and using "microhistory" – or small-scale, local studies – to try to plumb the values and dynamics of Confederate culture. Barton Myers brings both these trends together in his thoroughly researched and prize-winning study of violence in the no-man's-land of northeastern coastal North Carolina, a region invaded by Union forces as early as August 1861 and subject to destructive raids by both sides thereafter.

Myers treats a rural, six-county region on the Albemarle Sound whose exports of farm and forestry products had gone to the North through Norfolk, Virginia. In politics the Whig Party had been strong in this area, and its followers still retained considerable influence. Myers gives greatest attention to Pasquotank County, whose black and white populations were equal, with freed blacks comprising one-third of the African-American population. Voters in Pasquotank had given John Bell a majority of 62 percent in the 1860 presidential election and in February 1861 had opposed holding a secession convention by a 3-1 margin. After the war began, most citizens declared their loyalty to the Confederacy, but Unionism and concerns about the region's economy remained unusually strong.

The war soon sharpened internal divisions. In February 1862 Union forces captured Roanoke Island and briefly occupied Elizabeth City. Thereafter, Union forces remained nearby and raided frequently but did not control the area, while

pro-Confederate citizens who were “under no formal Confederate military control” began a guerrilla resistance. Soon pro-Union citizens organized to protect themselves from violence by Confederate guerrillas, and these pro-Union men, termed “Buffaloes” by secessionists, launched attacks and raids from the swamps or in some cases joined the U.S. Army. In this pattern of escalating violence, neither side gained the upper hand for long, but ordinary citizens suffered, whatever their sympathies. Confederate and state leaders bemoaned the situation, but they were unsuccessful in efforts either to enforce conscription or to bring guerrilla bands under effective military control.

Then, in December 1863 Union general Edward Augustus Wild led 1,800 black soldiers, including some men from the area, on an expedition into northeast North Carolina that targeted Confederate guerrillas and freed up to 2,500 slaves. At first Wild punished Confederate sympathizers and drew up lists of Union loyalists to protect, but soon violence became more indiscriminate. When some of Wild’s black troops were captured, he retaliated by taking hostages, including women, and racist paranoia soared. On December 18, 1863, Wild executed Confederate guerrilla Daniel Bright and displayed his corpse at a crossroads as a message to pro-Confederate irregulars and residents. Rapidly newspapers in many parts of the Confederacy denounced the violence and allegedly horrible sexual insults of Wild’s “negro banditti.”

But the most striking reaction to Wild’s raid was the fact that local leaders came together in a public meeting that “‘unanimously’” appealed to U.S. and North Carolina authorities for relief. They denounced blockade running and pleaded with Governor Zebulon Vance to “remove or disband” his partisan rangers so that Union troops would allow the people of Pasquotank to be “let alone.” Within two weeks 523 citizens – “every white man remaining in the county who was not fighting in the guerrilla resistance” – had signed this petition. Moreover, emissaries went from Pasquotank to the five neighboring counties, and within a month Union General Benjamin Butler declared that all but one of these counties had joined in the plea to be left alone by both sides. For unarmed citizens, elite or common folk alike, the fear of losing their property and of witnessing the complete dissolution of the social and racial order proved more important than political loyalties.

Barton Myers has scrupulously mined every apparent source of evidence on these events, which are undeniably striking but less unusual than many might think. How successful has he been in meeting the difficult challenge of

illuminating guerrilla warfare and using microhistory to reveal inner dynamics of the culture?

What Myers has shown about the vicious, vengeful nature of guerrilla warfare is as impressive as it is sobering. Violence and retaliation by both sides made life in this no-man's-land painful and intolerable. On both sides people lost lives, property, hopes and dreams, and the minimal trust that is a basic requirement for community life. Myers shows that this kind of irregular violence grew out of the military situation but equally out of southern culture's propensity for retaliatory violence, dueling, and "the sort of individualized combat that one historian has called 'personal warfare.'" He demonstrates that situations like this were so damaging to southern morale that both Confederate and state governments moved by 1864 to abolish partisan rangers and bring guerrilla units under greater discipline within the regular army. On an important and disputed detail, he argues convincingly that Daniel Bright was very likely a deserter turned guerrilla, as Union forces insisted, and therefore liable to execution in accord with the North's General Orders 100 (the Lieber Code).

Myers has also proven that for many residents of northeastern North Carolina local loyalties – concern for family members, for ways of making a living, and for the stability of the neighborhood – were more important than Confederate independence or the preservation of the Union. But beyond that important achievement it is difficult to go. As historian Jill Lepore has noted, this kind of detailed local study depends on "slender records" of "elusive characters." Many family letters or individual diaries simply do not exist. Other important records have been lost. Explanations often have to be imposed from the outside; rarely do they spring from the data. The motivations of many individual secessionists, Unionists, Confederate guerrillas, and Buffaloes – aside from the political allegiance they chose – remain elusive. Party loyalties and a conservative Whiggish view of order and economic progress seem to have mattered substantially in Pasquotank County. Detailed analysis by Myers of the economic and social characteristics of members of the two bands reveals only minor differences in income, occupation, or slaveholding. The messy, tangled phenomenon of internal war in this no-man's-land between the two armies often remains, at the individual level, as mysterious as it was punitive.

Paul Escott is Reynolds Professor of History at Wake Forest University. His recent books are "What Shall We Do with the Negro?": Lincoln, White Racism, and Civil War America (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009) and

the forthcoming The Confederacy: The Slaveholders' Failed Venture
(Praeger/ABC-CLIO).